

FROM TIMID TO TENACIOUS:

Working with difficult temperament traits



Parents know, teachers see, child care providers observe, even strangers pick up clues... each child's temperament is different from the start. When upset, some babies barely whimper while others scream for dear life; some giggle and coo before others manage a slim grin; one cuddles quietly for long periods while another endlessly squirms. Awareness of a child's distinctive temperament can help adults understand a child's unique needs and develop strategies that work.

WHAT IS TEMPERAMENT?

Temperament is simply our natural instinctive response to our environment. Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess, the original temperament researchers, were able to identify and measure nine temperament traits that illustrated babies' different responses to the same situation. They found traits were consistent over time and continued into adulthood.

Think of a child in your life and complete the temperament chart on the adjacent page.

SOME TEMPERAMENT TRAITS ARE VERY CHALLENGING, ESPECIALLY IN COMBINATION.

Imagine a young child who is highly persistent, emotionally intense, and not very distractible. This child will present unique challenges for caregivers. But, the child can still learn the skills needed to succeed! Though adults will not be able to change this child's temperament, they do have the unique ability to influence the expression of a child's temperament over time.

NO TEMPERAMENT TRAIT IS INHERENTLY GOOD OR BAD.

Each trait has a positive side and can have desirable results depending on the age of the child and that child's interaction with his or her environment. A persistent one-year-old who makes the hundredth straight attempt to get on the counter will challenge adults. But, it is outstanding at nine-years-old when that determination will help the child finish a difficult assignment. Adults can get very frustrated when a three-year-old with a negative first reaction rejects new places, people, and things. However, this "no" impulse will be a great attribute if, as a teenager, this child is offered drugs. Whether or not a child's specific temperament has a positive or negative outcome will be determined by if the child "fits" in their environment.

ADULTS CAN WORK WITH A CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT.

Provide a "good fit": The number one way to ensure a positive outcome is to provide a good fit between your child's temperament, your expectations, and the child's environment. A child with a high activity level needs an environment with ample space and time to run and move. Adults should adjust expectations accordingly. For example, a stop at the park before a trip to the store will give the child a chance for physical activity and make it easier for him or her to sit in the cart at the store.

Avoid common triggers: Children who are easily distracted have trouble if they have a lack of routines or are given too many directions at once. A persistent child will have problems if abruptly interrupted, not given choices, or if there are unclear or changing limits. A child that is slow to adapt will be triggered by too many changes, being rushed, and surprises. It is much easier to work with a child when there are limited triggers in a day.

Build the positive side: For best results, put your energy into building the positive side of a trait rather than trying to change the child's natural reaction to the world. A child with a first reaction of "no" to a fun play-group or greeting a new relative will challenge adults. But, pushing a child when he/she is uncomfortable will not make this child "quick to warm up". Adults can help by acknowledging the positive, "Wow, you really watch before joining in. You like to make sure things are safe before doing them. I bet you will join when you are ready". Providing encouragement and insight (not pressure) will help him understand his reaction and over time adjust as needed (most older children do join play rather quickly).



Avoid negative labels:

A child's traits can be enhanced or diminished over time. Imagine a highly intense child hearing continual messages like, "This child is a monster." "This child is our challenging one." "Watch out for this one!" With this reinforcement of the negative side of this trait, the child's intensity will likely increase over time. Remember, you can be a child's best advocate. People will end up viewing and treating a child similar to those adults who are close to that child.

Build self awareness:

Help a child understand themselves. "Sometimes rough clothes bother you. Let's pick out something soft today." "Your body sure needs to move, we have been sitting awhile, let's groove!" The child's increased understanding will help the child adapt as needed over time.

Keep limits and boundaries:

Do not let temperament be an excuse for unacceptable behaviors. Just because a child experiences big emotions, does not mean it is okay to lash out physically at mom or dad when upset. This child will need to learn techniques to soothe and calm those emotions. Start out with lower expectations but then work on building the needed skills. For example, help a child who hits others when angry learn to hit a pillow instead, then only clench and release fists, later encourage expression through words.

Celebrate the child!

Each child is a magical and wonderfully unique individual! This born leader, wonderfully sensitive, energetic mover and shaker is going to make a wonderfully positive impact on the world, with your help.



Learn more:

There are so many ways to work with different temperamental traits to avoid power struggles and build a positive connection with children. Remember, you have a temperament too! The way an adult and child meld is a result of the interaction of both temperaments. Begin building on your positive relationship by recognizing and valuing each of your unique qualities. The child will gain skills needed for the future while building a rewarding relationship with a caring and compassionate adult today -

YOU!

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This article originally appeared in Rochester Women Magazine. Raelene is founder of Thriving Together LLC, an organization dedicated to developing and delivering engaging Keynotes, in-person workshops, valuable free resources, live Facebook "Naptime Nuggets", and other online education series, focused on decreasing stress, enhancing joy, and bolstering the success of early childhood professionals in their critical work.

May be reprinted for educational purposes. Need resources or an engaging speaker? Contact Raelene at ThrivingTogether@hughes.net 507-581-9436 www.thriving-together.com

TEMPERAMENT CHART

Intensity of Reactions

How strong or energetic are the child's emotional responses?



Persistence

How persistent is the child? How long is her attention span?



Sensitivity

How sensitive is the child to sights, sounds, smells, textures, and other's emotions?



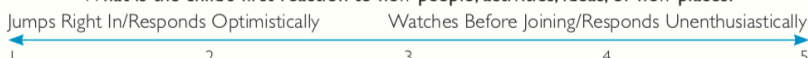
Distractibility

How easily is the child distracted from what he is doing?



First Reaction/Initial Response

What is the child's first reaction to new people, activities, ideas, or new places?



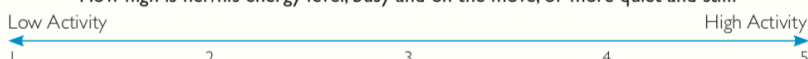
Adaptability

How quickly does the child adapt to changes in the environment?



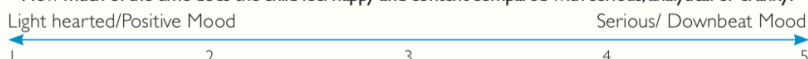
Activity Level/Energy

How high is her/his energy level; busy and on the move, or more quiet and still?



Mood

How much of the time does the child feel happy and content compared with serious, analytical or cranky?



Regularity

How predictable and regular are the child's eating, sleeping, and elimination patterns?



To learn more about temperament, join Raelene Ostberg for the "You've Got Personality Kid!" lunch-time seminar on October 15, 2009. Contact First Steps for more information at 282-1027 or email info-fs@FirstSteps.us